PERMANENT REVIEW COMMITTEE ON THE

Status of Women NEWSLETTER

FACULTY OF FINE ARTS

1st Issue Concordia University **February, 1990**

Concordia's Faculty of Fine Arts is the home of the University's first faculty-based Permanent Review Committee on the Status of Women. Since our inception in 1983, we have been dedicated to fostering a gender-balanced curriculum in our Faculty. Our goals are philosophical and pragmatic, and our method is to support and to generate activities and forums for ideas and opinions. We are also interested in alerting incoming students to debates and discussions pertaining to gender, politics and the arts.

The Committee has sponsored many events such as the panel "Beauty and the Beast: Art and Politics", a Seminar/Workshop on Sexism in Teaching, the exhibition "Women's Work", and the sponsorship of such speakers as Martha Rosler and Mary Kelly. Our most recent project, completed last spring, is the collection of essays and visual art, Critical Paths, which is one of our most ambitious projects to date, and provides a critical reflection on issues and processes within the University and their relation to the social world. Critical Paths is available for $5.00 from the supply store in the Visual Arts Building, as well as other venues (at a higher cost).

We have weekly meetings at which we discuss current projects and issues. Everyone is invited to attend these meetings and to advise us of pertinent issues in the development of gender equality in the Faculty of Fine Arts and the University at large.

WHAT? FEMINISM?

Corrine Corry

For forty years I have been a part of a culture that teaches particularly, but not only, women to efface themselves, to censor their thoughts, to be prepared to bow to another authority. Our society has effectively concealed women's presence and experience even from ourselves. I remember "hanging-around" with the boys because the girls' concerns were "too feminine" (not serious); I remember calling other girls "sluts" (enforcing a sexual norm). I live in a sexist culture and it has shaped me. I want to understand why we tolerate social relations which subordinate our own interests. I still frequently find myself engaged in assumptions that work counter to my personal and feminist concerns. I still participate in enforcing sexism, even in myself.

Can I undermine my complicity? The feminist venture is more pervasive than I would have guessed when, as a Women's Libber in the late sixties, I metaphorically burned my bra. We thought then that the world would change overnight and we would all become"equal", whatever that might mean. The concerns of the Women's Movement (as it came to be called in the 70's) has more profoundly affected every aspect of my life (of our lives). Women are asking questions about what it means to be a woman, how our femininity and sexuality are defined and how we might now (re)define them for ourselves; about how women's bodies are objectified and how we can defeat the many forms of violence against women; about how to institute an equality of opportunity in education and work; and about how our social institutions can function to allow women the control of our bodies and our lives. Men's lives can no longer be understood outside of the context of women's presence.

Feminism is a politics responding to the patriarchal structure of society. The power relations within this structure are defined according to a norm which is white, middle-class, heterosexual, and male. The rights and privileges within patriarchy are instituted to serve the interests of the norm. For instance, a hierarchy of existence is clearly evident in the use of gender exclusive language: in the generic use of such terms as " man" and "he" to encompass all people. If one states: "the artist develops his concerns", then women are explicitly excluded. Using gender specific language: "the artist develops his or her concerns", confirms and reminds us of our presence.

All feminisms are based on the assumption that society is constructed in such a way that there is a discrimination in favour of men and that this is neither natural nor desirable. Feminism is also cognizant of the oppression of the many others who are disenfranchised within our social structures. Recognition of my own difference as a woman within the dominant culture has also allowed me to be sensitive to the many others (other to the norm) with whom I live. I must also recognize how I enforce discrimination in favour of race, class, age, and so on, in order to modify those presumptions.

Feminism is a wide range of theories and positions which are sometimes interlocking and often overlapping. There are many forms of feminist politics, and many feminist theories making sense of the conflicts

and contradictions in our daily lives. I see the social system (patriarchy) as having produced me, and my classism and racism are integral to that system. My feminism looks to a transformation of our social structures. I am interested in theories which lead me to a better understanding of ideological practices so that I am then able to speculate and activate change. I understand ideology as the way social relations are defined and represented. And I see theory as an ideological practice.

Some feminists do not want to transform the social nor the political system, but want full equality of opportunity, the individual's inalienable human rights, within that system. They want to upgrade such things as work equity, the division of domestic labour, and access to child care. There are also feminists who take a position within an autonomous community of women as a means of researching, recovering and validating women's natural femininity. They, too, are working toward a new social structure. However, they see much of the recent theory used by feminism as having little or nothing to say to women because the ideas are based on disciplines such as linguistics and psychology which were created by men.

"Feminism" is a plural definition of a singular noun. It is personal and political. It is defined individually by each person who takes a feminist position. It is also a set of international discourses. Within feminist theory and art practice we find many debates and an ability for self-analysis. This internal critique and expansion is feminism's strongest and most significant characteristic.

Feminist strategies in art aim to transform women's relation to art practice. We see declared feminist artists producing feminist art, feminist work produced by women who do not call themselves feminist, work by women artists who are feminist but who are not producing feminist work as such. I use the term "feminist artist" when I am discussing a position established specifically in relation to patriarchal culture. And I am interested in looking (particularly) at women's art production from a feminist perspective. It is through feminism that our art practices are reclaiming a gendered position, the position of women relative to the position of men, within representation. We are placing women (as women) as producing subjects, rather than the objects of art.

Some of the many divergent and often contradictory strategies within art practice include endorsement and celebration of the expression of an essential female creativity, restricting of audiences to women only, working in the conceptual realm, using appropriation of dominant culture and deconstruction of traditional representations, affirming different representations of women, and using media which is less embedded with traditions and assumptions. Many artists generate their own analysis or look for an analysis and critique which is produced within their terms of reference. These strategies are causing new relationships between theory and practice, identification of different audiences and places for art access, modification of hierarchies between media, and a mixing of media. There is also an ongoing examination of the different ways in which women have been marginalized by representation within art history.

Feminist research has amassed a substantial body of knowledge and has become an essential and growing discipline. It is also a discipline which crosses disciplines and which must be integrated into our entire educational system. It is not only the subject of specified courses, it must also become more pervasive in the form and content of all our courses.

Still more disciplines are defining themselves, such as Lesbian Studies, Gay Studies, and Black Studies. We are seeing an enire restructuring of human knowledge. Our educational institutions must be flexible, must be capable of looking to the future and transforming accordingly. They (we) cannot maintain a status quo. Our terror and resistance only betrays our underlying ideologies and the scope of the work to be done.

Teaching is a political act. Like art, it constructs a representation of reality which leads us to ethical standards and assumptions, to a set of expectations and choices. Both art and education are ways in which we create ourselves, and both have a responsibility to research a fuller understanding of the conditons of human life. We need to keep talking to ourselves about ourselves. And, we need to transform our representations in art and in education.

Karilee Fuglem

EDITORIAL
Mariela Borello
Karilee Fuglem

We are proud to have the opportunity to present this, the first newsletter for the Permanent Review Committee on the Status of Women of the Faculty of Fine Arts. This publication is another way of presenting the distinct voice of women in this faculty. It is especially vital that we, as women, speak with the clarity and authority of our own voices as the shock of the December 6, 1989 massacre at the University of Montreal threatens to fade into a vague, numbing fear. After this event, it is more important than ever to attempt to clarify the term "feminism", thus giving particular relevance to Corrine Corry's thoughtful and informative article about its many facets.

Stay tuned for information on upcoming Committee-sponsored events, the next one being a panel/lecture entitled "The Theory Invasion", a demystification of cultural theories scheduled for early March.